

A Brexit Assembly offers a way of overcoming the current deadlock

Brexit needs its own dedicated assembly, a Brexit Assembly, argues Hjalte Lokdam. The Brexit process has revealed the difficulty of addressing a question of such extraordinary constitutional and societal significance within the ordinary parliamentary process. A Brexit Assembly of extraordinary representatives dedicated only to Brexit offers a way of overcoming the current deadlock.



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As events over the last weeks and months have shown, government and Parliament are unable to develop an approach to Brexit that can command a convincing majority. Apart from the fact that the Brexit question is inherently thorny, there are a variety of reasons for this which are specifically related to the nature of ordinary representation. MPs are not elected solely on the basis of their position on Brexit but on the basis of their reputations and opinions on a broad range of issues. Invoking a party's manifesto position on Brexit, for instance, is thus misguided; not least because not all party members agree with the overall party line. Furthermore, while dedicating Parliament to Brexit risks neglecting other important political issues, leaving Brexit as only one issue among many others to be discussed and decided on risks taking valuable time and attention away from what may be the defining political issue of this generation. Addressing Brexit within the ordinary political process of Parliament is thus inadequate both for Brexit and [for the whole range of other important issues that this country faces](#).

Another important shortcoming of ordinary representation with regard to Brexit has to do with the nature of party politics. Brexit is an important issue for the parties, but it is and should be only one among many others. Parties are not creatures of the present. They must be sensitive to their past and their futures and allowing a single issue, however important, to define a party's identity risks tearing it apart. Subjecting Brexit to internal party politics, however, risks compromising the general public interest. The partisan nature of majoritarian government, furthermore, means that even if the current government should succeed in forcing through its approach to Brexit, this will be an approach that commands only a slim majority in Parliament and perhaps no majority in the electorate. Forcing a deal through on the basis of the current 'cliff-edge' approach only further emphasises the questionable long-term legitimacy of the deal.

Alternative decision-making approaches must be considered. A Brexit Assembly is a particularly promising and, I think, viable response to the present constitutional crisis. But what would a Brexit Assembly look like? And how does it differ from other approaches? There are many ways in which a Brexit Assembly could be designed, and the exact form would have to be worked out in a broader public debate before an election for it is called. Its basic principles, however, should be clear.

A Brexit Assembly would inscribe itself within the tradition of extraordinary representative assemblies, created to deal with extraordinary constitutional questions. The Philadelphia Convention is perhaps the most well-known of such (constituent) assemblies but there have been many others across the world, differing in form according to national customs and the nature of the issue at hand. This tradition is of relevance to Brexit because Brexit is a constitutional event of profound political significance and it demands a dedicated political assembly addressing it with the necessary seriousness. Created by, but independent from, Parliament, the Brexit Assembly would be dedicated only to the issue of Brexit and would be responsible for developing the UK's approach to it. It would negotiate both the terms of withdrawal and the future relationship of the UK with the EU. If the Assembly's deal with the EU commanded an overwhelming and/or qualified majority within the Assembly, Parliament should bind itself to implementing it. If the majority were slim, the agreement could be subjected to a public vote at the end of the process. In such a second referendum, the question on the ballot paper would be unambiguous and the meaning of Brexit would be clear to the people. Once a decision is reached, the Assembly ceases to exist.

A Brexit Assembly would be created through an extraordinary, direct election. The exact nature of it would have to be worked out but one option would be to ask the EU for a long extension and turn the European Parliament elections into an election for the Brexit Assembly. Another and better option would be to hold separate Brexit Assembly elections on the same day as the European elections and elect an appropriate number (larger than the number of MEPs, but smaller than the number of MPs) of extraordinary representatives either on a UK-wide or regional basis. Such an election would presumably involve politicians and societal groups campaigning on specific Brexit agendas and one can imagine various possible tickets emerging out of already existing movements and positions ([hard Brexit](#), [soft Brexit](#), [Remain](#)).

What is important is that Brexit is the only issue. In this way, it would become clear to the electorate what the different groupings stand for and what approach to Brexit one may reasonably expect from any given majority or coalition in the Assembly. This approach to some extent combines elements from a general election and a second referendum while avoiding the shortcomings of both. It will give the people a more nuanced say on the matter than a referendum and by focusing attention on Brexit, it would avoid the problem of Brexit becoming only one among many issues voted on. One could imagine, furthermore, that social groups other than the main parties would run and that alliances across the party spectrum could be formed on the basis of the specific question of Brexit.

The Brexit Assembly offers an institutional solution to the present deadlock that might provide a way of delivering a Brexit that both the people and its ordinary representatives can accept. Many issues would have to be resolved concerning the details and organisation of a Brexit Assembly, but if the principle is accepted, they are primarily of a practical nature. One might, for instance, oblige the Brexit Assembly to hold [citizen assemblies](#) across the country and consult [various social groups](#) on how to address their concerns. The exact form is important, but it is of secondary importance to the question of finding a way of resolving the question of Brexit in a manner that avoids an even deeper political and constitutional crisis and which can command the support of the people. A Brexit Assembly might be able to deliver just that.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the [LSE Brexit blog](#).

About the author



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